United Nations A/54/128 – E/1999/70

General Assembly
Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
8 June 1999

Original: English

General Assembly
Fifty-fourth session
Item 107 of the preliminary list*
Social development, including questions relating to the world social situation and to youth, ageing, disabled persons and the family

Economic and Social Council
Substantive session of 1999
Geneva, 5–30 July 1999
Item 14 (b) of the provisional agenda**
Social and human rights questions: social development

Progress towards the goal of education for all: the year 2000 Assessment

Interim report of the Secretary-General and of the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Summary

The present interim report has been prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 52/84 of 12 December 1997. As requested by the Assembly, the report examines the progress towards education for all, currently being reviewed by the ongoing Education for All (EFA) 2000 Assessment, and the feasibility and desirability of launching a United Nations decade to eradicate illiteracy. The final report will be submitted following the World Education Forum, April 2000.

* A/54/50.
** E/1999/100 and Add.1.

99-17172 (E) 150699

Introduction

1. In 1990, nations committed themselves to the goals of Education for All (EFA) and to ongoing assessment of their progress towards those goals. The Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All and Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs[1] covered six target dimensions: early childhood care and development, access to and completion of primary education, significant reduction in levels of illiteracy, particularly among women, improved learning achievement, provision of basic non-formal education and skills training for youth and adults and acquisition by families and individuals of the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to enhance the quality of their lives.

2. This commitment and resolve were reinforced in the recommendations made by all subsequent United Nations conferences of the 1990s, particularly the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 1992; the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 1994; the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 1995; and the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995. The importance of basic education for sustainable human development was forcefully reiterated in the report to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, 1996,[2] and the Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning, adopted in July 1997 by the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V). Member States and non-governmental organizations were urged to promote the right to education for all and to create conditions for all for learning throughout life. In 1996, a mid-decade review was held in Amman at which some 70 countries presented their national reports regarding goals of EFA.

3. In 1997, the General Assembly, in its resolution 52/84 of 12 December 1997, requested the Secretary-General in cooperation with the Director-General of UNESCO and in consultation with Member States, to consider effective ways and means for achieving the goal of education for all, including the desirability and feasibility of launching a United Nations decade to eradicate illiteracy.

4. General Assembly resolution 52/84 is one of the principal directives that lend authority to the Education for All (EFA) 2000 Assessment exercise, launched under the auspices of the EFA Forum in 1997, following a joint decision by the Heads of UNESCO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Bank. An intensive effort has been made by the Jomtien partner agencies to ensure that the EFA 2000 Assessment will mobilize all Member States and constitute not only a review of progress but also a renewal of goal-setting for the first decade of the twenty-first century. Much greater emphasis is now being placed on the presentation of disaggregated data (by gender, administrative level and so forth) that will facilitate in-country and regional educational planning processes. Case studies on literacy and non-formal education, thematic studies and special surveys on learning achievement and conditions of teaching/learning also form an integral part of the Assessment process.

Purposes and rationale of EFA Assessment 2000

5. Within the context of the many international conferences of the 1990s, the message includes the conviction that education is the cornerstone of social development, of achieving quality of life for individuals, economic prosperity, social cohesiveness in a diverse society, and values of peace and tolerance. It is related to key social issues such as poverty alleviation, equity (note particularly gender), population matters, health, nutrition and environment. Consequently, EFA Assessment 2000, as well as reviewing progress, has a focus on planning future policy initiatives, encompassing the progress and the challenges seen in early childhood education, primary education, learning achievement, literacy, essential skills and better living.

6. The EFA 2000 Assessment is very much concerned with improving the processes of consultation and participation in preparation of the report and planning the policies of education in the twenty-first century. Because of this, considerable emphasis has been placed on ownership of the report and its data by the Government concerned.

7. A Technical Advisory Group with members from the five Jomtien conveners, which was established at the international level, has compiled a list of 18 core EFA indicators and other, more qualitative means of reviewing EFA progress. It has also established an implementation mechanism which foresaw individual country reports as the cornerstone of the Assessment process, leading to regional syntheses of progress and future goal-setting. More than 160 national EFA Assessment 2000 coordinators have been named, and 10 regional technical advisory groups (RTAGs) have been constituted.

8. There will clearly be a huge demand, in the information age of the twenty-first century, for international agencies to assist countries, particularly their education communities, in improving their level of ease concerning collecting, processing and interpreting quantitative data. The EFA Forum secretariat has had to stress that any one indicator needs to be interpreted in relation to others, rather than in isolated stand-alone fasnion.

Advocacy and information

9. Since September 1998, the EFA Forum secretariat has published several issues of the *EFA Newsflash*, a special information service for professionals involved in the EFA 2000 Assessment. Moreover, all relevant information concerning the Assessment is available on the Forum's Web site.

10. A more comprehensive media strategy for the EFA 2000 Assessment and the World Education Forum is currently in the making. The strategy will consist of two phases. The first phase (September 1999–January 2000) will mainly focus on the EFA 2000 Assessment at the regional level, as well as the regional EFA meetings. The RTAGs are key actors in carrying out this first phase, whose aim is to mobilize the media at regional and national level. The Forum secretariat will be in charge of the second phase (February–April 2000). This phase will increasingly focus on mobilizing leaders of world opinion and the world media for the World Education Forum.

Upcoming events

11. RTAGs are now beginning to plan actively for the regional education meetings which will be held for the most part in the months of December 1999 and January 2000. Most of the donor community have rightly insisted that the EFA Assessment 2000 should focus on regional concerns, while not denying the need for a global synthesis. At present, regional education forum meetings are foreseen in five regions.

World Education Forum (Senegal, April 2000)

12. This global event will be the culmination point of the EFA 2000 Assessment. The World Education Forum will receive a global synthesis report based on the results of the EFA 2000 Assessment, together with the findings and recommendations of the previously held regional EFA meetings. Based on an examination of these documents, the Forum will adopt an Agenda for Education in the Twenty-first Century. This Agenda, the immediate outcome of the World Education Forum, will be disseminated very widely in different languages, and communicated to the several United Nations development conferences scheduled for later in the year 2000.

United Nations Decade to eradicate Illiteracy

13. The ongoing EFA 2000 Assessment will shed light on the achievements in the field of literacy around the world. Parallel to this extensive exercise, several efforts have already been carried out to evaluate the Major Project on Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, the UNESCO-led Action Plan for the Eradication of Illiteracy by the Year 2000, the Asia and Pacific programme of Education for All and Literacy (APPEAL) and the corresponding regional programmes in Africa and the Arab States. Renewed efforts are being made to understand both individual acquisition of literacy and societal literacy. More recently, the Seventh Conference of Ministers of Education of African Member States (MINEDAF VII), Durban, 1998, and the Council of Ministers of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) at its sixty-eighth ordinary session (Ouagadougou, 1998) enthusiastically endorsed the recommendation made by CONFINTEA V to launch an African Paolo Freire Literacy Decade in the framework of the Decade of Education in Africa.

14. The demand for literacy has increased drastically in recent years. The number of literate people has been considerably augmented, though unequally and at different paces, with different intensities. The number of people made literate in the world has increased from 1 billion to 3.3 billion during the last four decades. There are today 4.2 billion literate people, representing more than two thirds of today's population and almost the entire world population in 1970. Unfortunately, there are still an estimated 875 million illiterate people in the world. This figure is as impressive as it is disturbing.

Advocacy for a literacy decade

15. The review of experiences clearly shows that literacy is a topical issue and a useful tool, a generic and portable

competence with which to equip individuals, communities and nations to solve current problems and face emerging challenges. However, a literate world is more than the sum of literate societies, which in turn is more than the simple addition of literate individuals. A literate world is not only about learning but also — and mainly — about living.

16. It is evident that an understanding of literacy as set forth above has major implications for policies and actions. Such an understanding not only recognizes the need for, and importance of, literacy for sustainable livelihood and development but also compels us to depart from the firm and long-standing assumption that "by targeting literacy programmes on the illiterates of the world, we shall create a literate world". Experience shows that programmes that have a lasting and sustainable impact are embedded in social transformation processes that require literacy skills and competences. A literacy decade is indeed needed, though with the aim not of "eradicating illiteracy" but rather of creating a literate world where societies and individuals promote their own literacy projects. The advantage of such an approach is the recognition and appreciation of local cultures and practices and the proactive identification and impulsion of development processes and social movements that are literacy-demanding and socially rooted.

Notes

[1] See *Final Report of the World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs, Jomtien, Thailand, 5–9 March 1990*, Inter-agency Commission (United Nations Development Programme; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; United Nations Children's Fund; World Bank) for the World Conference on Education for All, New York, 1990.

[2] *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Paris, UNESCO, 1996).